The Fatal Necklace — by Roy Vickers

(Continued from Last Sunday)

CHAPTER XVII.

In the Ambulance.

RENSHAW, having posted the units of his cordon at all the salient points, took up a concealed post of observation from which he had a clear view of the front of the shop. Escape, he knew well, was now impossible in any direction. True, he had no man waiting in a boat on the river, which ran by the southern side of the house. But egress to the river being possible only through a window, the man at the nearest point had orders to give the alarm should an attempt be made that way.

For upwards of half an hour he waited. Then:

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's the game?"

Suddenly an upper window in the house above the shop was thrown up. There sounded a hoarse scream that might have come from a man or a woman, and a column of smoke issued from the open window. A second window was opened by a man of youngish appearance.

"Good enough," muttered Renshaw to himself and, crossing the road, entered the shop and shouted.

The aged proprietor issued from the house in answer to his shout.

"Your house is on fire," said Renshaw.

"I think not," was the answer. "We have had an accident with a spirit stove. But the flames have been extinguished after burning a curtain. That explains the smoke you saw from the street."

"I heard someone scream."

"That was my niece," said the old man gravely. "I regret to say that she is badly injured in the face. My nephew has telephoned for an ambulance. I thank you," he added, "for your inquiries."

Renshaw could do nothing but withdraw. He knew well that the only circumstances in which a policeman may force entry to a house are those in which he has reason to believe that felony is being committed.

"It's five hundred dollars to a doughnut it's a plant," muttered Renshaw to himself, as he returned to his point of observation.

When the motor ambulance turned the corner of the street, Renshaw gave a signal and three members of the cordon closed around the van as it stopped.

The driver stopped the engine, climbed down and opened the door wide. Weam appeared in the doorway of the shop.

"Can you bring the patient down?" asked the driver.

"No, no," answered Weam. "She cannot walk. Haven't you a stretcher?"

"I've got a stretcher, but I haven't brought a helper," replied the man. "They told me that you'd telephoned it was a walking case."

The man produced a stretcher from the interior of the van.

In a dilemma, he turned to the nearest of the growing knot of onlookers, a man of muscular appearance.

"P'raps you wouldn't mind lending me a hand, sir?"

Renshaw nodded to the man addressed, and the latter consented. Weam led the two men into the house.

Three minutes later the men reappeared. On the stretcher lay a figure covered with a rug and heavily swathed about the head. Between the bandages, as Renshaw looked, a stray tendril of hair gleamed in the sunshine—gleamed to wine.

As the driver and his voluntary assistant placed the stretcher in position in the body of the ambulance, Renshaw addressed the driver and handed his official card.

"The man who has just helped you with the stretcher is a detective like myself," he said in a low tone. "He will accompany the patient on the journey inside the van, and I will sit beside you in front."

As the driver started his engine, Renshaw passed the word to one of his men that the cordon was withdrawn and that report must be made at once by telephone.

The journey to the hospital occupied little more than ten minutes. The journey would have been made even more quickly but for the inevitable block in the dockside traffic.

As the car came to a standstill in the courtyard of the hospital, Renshaw jumped down and stood by the door of the van until the attendants came to open it.

"What in thunder"——

Renshaw thrust his shoulders into the van. Beside the attendants the van had but a single occupant—his own man he had ordered to ride inside. The man was lying bound on the stretcher. His mouth was gagged with a tress of hair, luxuriant and wine red.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Rosemary's Story.

AT five o'clock David Sorran was knocking at the door of his sister's house in Fifty-seventh street.

Doctor Violet Sorran had given orders that her brother was to be shown into her consulting room when he arrived. She was waiting there to receive him.

"Is Miss Wilding here?" were his first anxious words. Miss Sorran nodded, and noting the look of relief on her brother's face asked:

"Is she an exceptionally dangerous criminal, David?"

"She is not a criminal at all," retorted David with a heat that told his sister all she wished to know. "But there are one or two lunatics at the Police Headquarters who think she is."

"I quite understand," said his sister. "You will find her in the drawing room."

Without more ado Sorran hurried upstairs.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come," said Rosemary impulsively. "It was getting so late."

"I am sorry," said Sorran, "but you see, I had to shake off my man without his knowing that I had intended to do so. And it's time we had a serious talk. Are you ready?"

The girl assented. They sat together on the sofa.

"I want you to tell me everything that happened to you from the moment Mr. Belfrage came to East Pennacook to give you your legacy of $2,500. I know he persuaded you to come to the Astorbilt with it and see life. What inducement did he give you to come to New York?"

"He said he would put me in touch with a man who could certainly give me news of my poor sister Lucy."

"And that man was—?"

"Prince Mpak, of Auratia. You see, Lucy went to Salonika as a Red Cross nurse. So we thought at any rate, but we heard nothing more from her from the day she left America. I wrote to the Red Cross headquarters, but they had never heard of Lucy. By a curious coincidence I met by chance at the Astorbilt the very man, when I was trying to book a room, to whom Mr. Belfrage had intended to introduce me. It was a Captain Gillingham, who said he had seen Lucy when he was an attache after the armistice, at the court of Auratia. I couldn't get him to say exactly what she was doing there, but I knew it was Lucy, because he described her hair, which is the same color as mine.

"Captain Gillingham told me that Prince Mpak was coming that night to the hotel—and he also told me why he had come to New York. That was the afternoon that he brought the chain."

"The chain?"

"That chain you saw me wearing. It is a most extraordinary thing—I thought it must be Lucy's, as she had one made of our grandmother's hair, but I know she took it to Salonika with her. Besides, this was slightly different—it was set with emeralds, and Lucy's wasn't. Well, he told me to wear this chain and to smile at the Prince as he came in and that the Prince would then come up and speak to me and tell me all about Lucy. But he didn't—and after that"——

She paused in obvious distress. Sorran determined to save her from the ordeal of telling that which he had already deduced.

"Don't tell me any more," he said. "Just trust me. Will you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then come with me," said Sorran.

CHAPTER XIX.

An Important Clue.

AT six o'clock of the same evening Inspector Dolan leaned back in his chair with a contented sigh. He had digested the last of the voluminous reports that had poured in on him in a steady stream since the beginning of the affair. He was now in possession of every salient fact in the case.

He picked up the mouthpiece of his dictaphone.

"Memorandum to Mr. Lester," he spoke into the receiver. "It is essential that you should concentrate your energies on finding the means by which the door was locked after the crime had been committed." There followed similarly curt directions to every detective in charge of any particular line of investigation. Then he pressed the electric button. A clerk removed the cylinder and within ten minutes his various instructions, typewritten and duplicated, were on their way to the recipients.

An hour later Lester himself entered the room. In his hand he was holding an envelope somewhat gingerly.

"This is the answer to your question," he said as he handed the inspector the envelope which the latter promptly opened. Inside was a long hair. Dolan laid the hair against his coat-sleeve. Against the dark background it gleamed to a dull wine red.

"Where did you find this?" demanded the inspector.

"In the lock itself, sir," was the answer. "I don't mind confessing that until I received your memorandum I had completely overlooked the impossibility of the Prince rising up to lock the door after he had been strangled. Whereas, of course, it is quite obvious that the thieves themselves must have relocked the door behind them."

"Exactly," said Inspector Dolan, "and we find that they did it with this. And you can see at a glance where that hair came from. How did they actually use it?"

"As nearly as I could see, sir, they had tied one end of the hair round the lever that controls the bolts. The hair was then threaded above the first bolt and through the Yale lock on the dummy wooden door. I tested the lever and found it requires a pressure of two pounds to move it."

"A hair of such thickness as this," said the Inspector, "would stand a weight of about fifteen pounds with a steady pull. See how elastic it is."

Lester was about to withdraw, but Inspector Dolan stayed him.

"I shall probably call you and Hall into consultation to-night," he said. "I think the groundwork is about complete. I have been through all Hall's work. He has missed nothing—and he has produced nothing—which, of course, is not his fault. He has certainly succeeded in narrowing down our field of investigation."

"Is there any clue as to the whereabouts of the jewels?" asked Lester.

"No," replied the Inspector. "We know, of course, that, given that the door was opened, the whole thing could have been done in less than three minutes. The jewels could have been removed to one of the bedrooms and there repacked in ordinary travelling trunks. The hotel records show that no fewer than two hundred and sixty trunks and bags left the Astorbilt between seven and eleven-thirty of the morning on which the murder was discovered. We know that the jewels are not in the hotel, as every corner has been searched. We do not know how they were taken out of the hotel. We are driven back to the murder, where at least we have something solid to go on."

"May I ask what, Inspector?" said Lester.

Dolan indicated the hair in the envelope.

"We have this," he replied, "and we have the fact that the telephone was tapped in her room. Put the facts together. The hair necklace that strangled the Prince, the hair that refastened the bolt, the hair of the woman herself who occupied the room in which the telephone was tapped—by means of which the whole crime was committed! Add that the same woman has proved adept at throwing off our men. Add that the chambermaid in charge of that room has been in a drugged state for twenty-four hours during which she is not missed—obviously because someone has taken her place. Add that this very afternoon I drew a cordon of men round the house in which I knew that girl to be and that she sailed through that cordon and got clean away."

"But," exclaimed Lester, "I thought that she was dead—that she had been picked up at the Battery, drowned."

"I don't care whether Rosemary Wilding has been drowned or not," retorted Inspector Dolan, heatedly. "Whether her name is Rosemary or Lucy or neither, I know that the girl I want for the murder of Prince Mpak of Auratia—the girl with that strange wine colored hair is alive at this moment and being protected from us by none other than David Sorran himself."

Lester made a gesture that betrayed his astonishment at his chief's words.

"Sorran?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes," declared the Inspector, positively. "I want the girl and I want Sorran. If——"

He broke off as there came a knock on the door.

"Come in," he commanded irritably.

The door opened. The next instant Inspector Dolan stood face to face with David Sorran and the girl who at least appeared on the hotel lists as Miss Rosemary Wilding.

"Because I love you," he breathed—and the next instant he had gathered her in his arms and their lips met.

CHAPTER XX.

A Voluntary Confession.

INSPECTOR DOLAN'S amazement was almost ludicrous. He stared from Rosemary Wilding to Sorran and back again to Rosemary, and still he could find no words. He had declared to Lester that he had brought home the murder of Prince Mpak to the girl with the wine-colored hair, and that, if it were not for Sorran, she would be now have been charged with the crime. Into the middle of his angry accusation against the famous detective Sorran—the man himself—had walked, bringing with him the woman for whom every member of a highly organized police force was on the watch.

Sorran surveyed the stupefied Dolan quizzically.

"I'm afraid we've startled you, Inspector," he said. "This is Miss Wilding—Miss Rosemary Wilding."

Inspector Dolan collected himself sufficiently to rise to his feet. He dismissed Lester with a nod and placed a chair for Rosemary.

"Miss Wilding's appearance here is certainly unexpected—as unexpected as your own, Sorran," he said, grimly. "There is a good deal that it would be as well for you to clear up as soon as possible."

"I am quite ready to tell you anything you want to know," replied Sorran, "and Miss Wilding is prepared for the most searching cross-examination. She has nothing to conceal."

Inspector Dolan's keen eyes turned to the girl's face.

"It would be most unwise for Miss Wilding to attempt to conceal anything—now," he said. His tone implied that he held both of them in the hollow of his hand. He reseated himself in his swivel chair and referred to a memorandum sheet. Sorran smiled encouragingly at the girl.

"My first question, Miss Wilding," began the Inspector, "is—do you admit having slept in your room, No. 718, in the Astorbilt Hotel, on the night of the late Prince Mpak's arrival? It is my duty to warn you that your answers will be used in evidence against you."

"If necessary," put in Sorran.

"I am going to admit everything—Mr. Sorran told me to," answered Rosemary, with a simplicity that made Dolan heartily dislike his task. "I slept in my room that night. I returned to it about midnight, after I had been to a dance with a Captain Gillingham."

"Did anything out of the ordinary happen that night?" asked the Inspector.

"Yes," answered the girl with a wholly delightful blush. "I—I couldn't unfasten my dress. I rang the bell, but no one answered. So I thought I would try the telephone. But I am not used to telephones, and I must have done it wrongly, because a man's voice answered, and he seemed rather angry."

The Inspector's eyelids flickered. The telephone had been tapped from Rosemary's room. If it had been done while she was out and without her knowledge, her attempt to communicate with the domestic staff of the Astorbilt had resulted in ringing up no less a person than Prince Mpak, locked with his gold and jewels into the room diagonally opposite hers.

"I was wondering what to do," continued Rosemary, "when there came a knock at the door and a chambermaid came in—not the one that had been there the night before. She had a very kind and pleasant manner, and she brought a cup of coffee. I told her I never took coffee at night, and she seemed quite hurt, so I drank it so as not to seem unappreciative. I think she must have been unused to her work, for she did not turn the sheets back or provide hot water, and when I asked her to unfasten my dress she looked surprised and almost frightened. I had to explain the fastenings to her and she did very badly, with fumbling fingers."

"That chambermaid was, of course, a man," put in Sorran.

"A man!" cried Rosemary in dismay. "Oh, how dreadful! What must he have thought of me?" Her eyes filled with tears and she looked helplessly at Sorran.

"I think you are probably alarming yourself needlessly, Miss Wilding," said the Inspector with a dry smile. "Mr. Sorran has a knack of jumping to conclusions."

"It won't take you long to check that conclusion, Inspector," said Sorran. "The man is in your custody at the present moment and will probably confess if you give him a chance as State's evidence."

"Who is he? What have we got him for?" Dolan was compelled to ask.

"I don't know his name," replied Sorran, "but you have him on a charge of assaulting one of your men—in a motor ambulance on its way to the hospital. If I am correctly informed, he was again impersonating one of the opposite sex. The policeman on point duty grabbed him as he made his escape from the van in a block in the traffic. I commend that officer to your attention, Inspector."

This oblique reminder of how his cordon had been fooled did not improve Dolan's temper.

"We will leave that point for the present," said the Inspector testily. "There are others to be settled of equal importance. What time did you leave your room on the following morning, Miss Wilding?"

"The same maid, whom you now say is a man, brought my breakfast to my room about eight o'clock, although I had not ordered it," replied Rosemary. "I was very sleepy and had a bad headache and could not wake up, and I have a dim memory of the maid giving me something to drink which did me a lot of good, and in about half an hour I was all right. On the breakfast tray was a note. I have it here, if you would like to read it."

From her vanity bag she took a crumpled envelope and handed it to the Inspector.

"Dear Miss Wilding," Dolan read, "I was able to see your sister last night after I left you. I gave her back her chain as agreed. It is just possible that I may be able to arrange a meeting to-day, but it will be very difficult and I must ask you to follow my directions very closely. As soon as you get up, go to the ladies' reading room on the first floor. If neither your sister nor myself appear before ten forty-five, immediately leave the hotel and take a taxi to the Lafayette, Times Square. Go to the front entrance, pass through the hall, turn at right angles to the left, and you will come to the side entrance. Drawn up outside this you will see a car. Get into this car without speaking to any one. I shall be inside."

"Do you mean to say, Miss Wilding," said the Inspector, as he returned the note, "that it did not strike you that the object of this little movement was to throw off any detective that might be shadowing you?"

"Yes, of course," replied Rosemary. "Captain Gillingham explained that that was what it was for, and that if the police were to see my sister anywhere about while Prince Mpak was in New York they would probably arrest her, and that, through my likeness to my sister—our hair, you know—the various detectives would probably make frequent mistakes and take me for her.

"Well, the motor-car took me to the curiosity shop where Mr. Sorran found me. Here I met the man whom I had known as Mr. Belfrage, the man who had brought me my legacy, and I found that he was known here by the name of Weam. I had no means of knowing which was his real name. Mr. Weam explained that unfortunately it had been found impossible at the last moment for my sister to come to the house to meet me. I was going to return to the Astorbilt. Mr. Weam told me that if I were to do so I should certainly be arrested. I asked what for, and he told me that Prince Mpak had been murdered. I said I was sorry, but that it had nothing to do with me, at which he seemed very embarrassed, asked me to sit down again, then told me that Prince Mpak had been strangled with the very chain, belonging to my sister Lucy, which I had been wearing the previous evening.

"'That is impossible,' I said, 'because Captain Gillingham returned the chain to my sister after he left me, about midnight last night.'

"'Exactly,' said Mr. Weam; 'now do you understand that if you go back to the Astorbilt Hotel, you will be arrested for the murder, and you will have to clear yourself by proving that it was your sister Lucy and not yourself who killed Prince Mpak. You will find it very easy to prove, because your sister had the very strongest possible motive a woman can have for doing so.'

"I was terribly upset at hearing this, and I could not talk about it for some time. When I felt better, Mr. Weam explained that the very best thing I could do would be to keep out of the way of the police and let them go on thinking that I had done it. In the meantime, he would do all in his power for my sister Lucy and would try to get her safely out of the country. I agreed, as it seemed the only thing to do. It was arranged that I should stay in the house and not go out. And then Mr. Sorran came and found me and told me that my sister Lucy was dead. It is all very terrible, and I don't know what I shall say to my mother."

Inspector Dolan's attitude was non-committal.

"If you believe all that was told you, Miss Wilding—by Weam and by Mr. Sorran—you must have reasoned that, your sister being dead, no harm could have come to you had you been arrested. Why, then, did you allow them to make that elaborate subterfuge in order to get you from the house?"

"That was my doing, Inspector," put in Sorran. "I knew, of course, that you would be bound to arrest her in the light of your facts. And I happen to have made a promise to Mrs. Wilding concerning the welfare of her daughter which intended—and intend—to keep."

"I see," said the other man coldly. "You considered yourself free to conspire with men you knew to be criminals in order to defeat the police."

Sorran had no intention of letting that pass.

"I consider that my position as a private detective gives me a freedom of action which would be impossible to one in an official position," he said impressively. "I have always used that freedom—as I have used it in this case—to assist your department. If you are dissatisfied with my methods, Inspector, you can arrest Miss Wilding for the murder and myself for being an accessory. Your department will thus be relieved of the embarrassment of my eccentric methods."

Sorran's plain hint that he would throw up the case unless an apology was forthcoming made the Inspector realize the extent to which he was depending upon the private detective.

"I don't think that's justified, Sorran," he said amicably. "You know perfectly well that the only thing I object to in your methods is your habit of keeping them dark. If I implied otherwise just now, I ask you to accept my apology."

"No ill feeling," said Sorran, offering his hand; "but I'm getting horribly hungry. Miss Wilding has kindly consented to dine with me to-night. Will you come along and join us and I'll tell you the whole yarn."

Inwardly Inspector Dolan fumed. It was the most important case his department had ever handled, and here was the man who knew more about it than anybody proposing what amounted to a sheer waste of time. He would have liked to refuse, but he had already had a foretaste of the penalties for putting Sorran in bad humor.

"Thanks, I'd like to," he said, glancing anxiously at the clock over his desk. "Where did you think of going, may I ask?"

"The Astorbilt," replied Sorran promptly, "if you have the nerve to face it in morning dress."

As he spoke there was that in his eye which made the Inspector answer:

"Sure, let's make it the Astorbilt."

CHAPTER XXI.

The Chain of Evidence.

TO Dolan's unconcealed annoyance Sorran refused to discuss the case over dinner. After dinner Sorran suggested that they sit a while in the lobby. They chose a low divan in the central hall, near the swing doors. A stream of guests and habitues passed before them, many casting cold glances at the morning dress of the two men, as many feasting their eyes upon the strange beauty of the girl. A foreign ambassador, pretending to be interested in a jeweler's show-case was making such open attempts to force himself upon Rosemary's attention as to draw a reproving scowl from Sorran before he began his tale.

To Inspector Dolan it seemed the most unsuitable place in the world for their discussion. He was only prevented from protesting by an instinctive feeling that Sorran had chosen the place with a definite object, of which he would know the reason later.

Sorran, as was his custom, plunged into his account without preliminary.

"The brilliant blackguards who planned this stunt made one mistake only. They omitted to ascertain at what time the houseman of the Lafayette is in the habit of polishing the brass-work of the outer door. But for that mistake nothing short of a miracle would have prevented your department from carrying out their scheme for them, namely, that you should secure the arrest and ultimate conviction of Miss Rosemary Wilding for the murder, of which even now she knows considerably less than you and I. As a result of that mistake I was able to get from the houseman, a fellow of unusually alert intelligence, a description of the car to which Miss Wilding has already referred, which, in spite of a change of name-plate en route, eventually enabled me to find my way to the curiosity shop in Christopher street.

Sorran paused. He had caught himself in the act of describing the details of his detective work—a breach of professional etiquette in view of the fact that he was talking to the Inspector. A good detective reports his results. His methods of obtaining those results should only be referred to upon special request.

"I am sorry," he said to Inspector Dolan. "I will give you a clean report, and if you are interested in the groundwork we can talk about it later. I think I have the whole story, and although I got the end first and gradually worked back to the beginning, I'll tell it the right way up.

"The whole crime, both the murder and the robbery, revolves on the personality of Miss Lucy Wilding. Miss Lucy during the war was employed by the War Department as a special secretary. She was their star girl, being able to take shorthand in four European languages. When Prince Mpak was in Europe at the time of the armistice she was lent to him for some special work. The Prince seems to have developed a violent infatuation for her, which, one gathers, was

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